

Mack Ludlow – *Fare Thee Well, Tecumseh Valley*

“It’s not great, but it’s here.”

It’s something like a low budget re-imaging of what it would be like to be a painter in London in the 1980s. A painter who may look at the occasional art magazine or book, borrowing the superficial mannerisms of capital A art, without ever really engaging with it. With this kind of distance, it doesn’t feel the burden of inspiration. It’s art without risk. It could have come from almost anywhere. If this painter were an actor, he would be speaking with a mid-Atlantic accent, mumbling sporadic banalities and slurring his maimed anecdotes. It’s the kind of work my old high school art teacher would store in his barn and pull out after having too many drinks around the bonfire on a summer night.

What results is a weirdly calm place, and it’s place rather than space that registers. Space tends to require drama, or at least its potential, but place is more like settling but not quite home. Place is compounded with pace. Again, it’s a something that is not quite something that’s happening. The pace could be mistaken for languorous, but this would fail to approximate what it requires to maintain itself. There is a fair amount of propping up going on. This is linked intimately to the little theatre quality that the work possesses. Not quite a show, what he presents is closer to a backdrop. It is a theatre without much drama, akin to an amateur dance recital or a play put on by high school geeks and frumpy housewives. This is not to imply that Ludlow is acting, or merely playing a role. It is not affectation or mockery, but a way of playing on the art world he grew up with and reconstructing it using deliberately cheap means.

Unlike art that, deliberately or not, functions as decoration, this is work that is decorative without being decoration. It creates a place rather than accents it. It does this thanks to the cumulative quality the work takes on. Each of its elements functions like an example. Presented like a series of sketches, its elements announce themselves as set pieces for a story that is never disclosed. Textbook examples without the text. In this way, there is something almost picturesque about it, but it is the picturesque minus the exotic, the sublime or the grotesque. It is the picturesque as the there that’s there.

- matthew purvis